



UNITED STATES SENATE
**REPUBLICAN
POLICY COMMITTEE**

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Democrats Out of Step with Public

Americans Support President Bush's Call for a National Missile Defense System

A majority of Americans — 51 percent over 38 percent — “favor George W. Bush’s call for developing a national missile defense system,” according to a poll conducted in May of this year by the Pew Research Center, in collaboration with the non-governmental Council on Foreign Relations (CFR).

These most recent results echo two previous studies conducted by Pew and CFR, documenting consistent public support for missile defense. In their May 2000 survey, Pew and CFR found that 52 percent of the American people supported, while 37 percent opposed, missile defense. Support for missile defense was even greater in the February 2001, with 54 percent supporting and only 32 percent opposing missile defense [Council on Foreign Relations, “Public Behind Bush on Key Foreign Issues, 6/11/01; www.cfr.org and www.people-press.org].

That three surveys conducted jointly by two organizations, neither of which carries a pro-GOP or even pro-missile defense bias, finds strong public support for missile defense is newsworthy. Yet, only a few media outlets reported these findings.

Arguments For Missile Defense Less Known, Yet More Compelling

According to the most recent CFR and Pew survey, respondents find more compelling the arguments *for* national missile defense, even though they are more familiar with arguments *against* deployment:

“Fully 60 percent have heard that the program might be too costly, and nearly half are aware of concerns that building a missile defense system could trigger a new arms race and damage relations with Russia and China. Fewer have heard the arguments, made by missile defense proponents, that such a system would protect the United States from attacks by rogue nations and accidental launches and could also be used to defend American allies. **Despite the gap in awareness, however, majorities see these as important reasons to support the program; in contrast, no argument against the proposal draws majority support.**” [CFR poll, p.1]

Equally important was the finding that none of the arguments *against* a missile defense system is viewed by a majority of the public as an important reason to *oppose* its creation. The survey included five common counter-arguments, namely, that:

- Deployment of missile defenses is too costly;
- Deployment could trigger a new arms race;
- Technology is not yet available for a system to work;
- Relations between the U.S., Russia, and China could be damaged by deployment;
- There is no real threat to justify building a defense system.

It is interesting to note that these are the same criticisms used by Democrats who oppose missile defense. [See RPC Paper, “Refuting Democrat Criticisms of Missile Defense, 5/18/01].

Conversely, the three major arguments in support of a national missile defense system laid out in the poll, “*though less well known by the public, are viewed as more compelling than the arguments against the creation of such a system*” [CFR poll, p.4]. The arguments promoting missile defense “are all viewed, on balance, as important reasons to support the creation of such a system” [p. 4]. These arguments are that a missile defense system:

- Could protect against accidental launches (more than half of those who have never heard this argument say this is an important reason to support missile defense);
- Could protect our allies;
- Is necessary because current defenses are inadequate.

Even more significant is the survey’s findings that “the major arguments in favor of the development of a missile defense have connected with even fewer people. . . . As opposed to the arguments against a missile defense system, the arguments in favor are no more well known by supporters of the proposal than they are by the program’s opponents” [p.4]. Yet, there is still consistent public support for a missile defense system.

Support Stays Consistent

Public support for a missile defense system is so unwavering that support remained largely unchanged even after the major arguments from both sides were set out and evaluated. The study measured attitudes by first asking participants whether or not they thought the United States should deploy a national missile defense system. They were then asked to evaluate arguments for and against the system. Finally, they were asked how they felt in light of those arguments. Very few respondents changed their minds after considering the various arguments as “supporters still outnumbered opponents by a margin of 49 percent to 41 percent” [p.3].

Finally, the study found that even those who oppose a national missile defense system are “less than enthusiastic about the leading arguments which underpin their side of the debate” [p.5]. Except for two arguments (relating to cost and arms race), bare majorities or minorities sign on to the other major counter-arguments identified in the poll.

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